

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

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Stage and theatrical photography requires skills from the photographer that are quite different from any other form of photography. The challenge is to the photographer's ability to isolate still pictures from the moving spectacle presented on the stage, usually under conditions which range from the difficult to the - seemingly - impossible. The venue and situations will often demand the utmost of the photographer's technical skills, and dealing with the performers themselves will often necessitate tact and diplomacy; at the same time one should have total regard for the other photographers who are around at the same time and who are experiencing the same difficulties. Difficult lighting conditions, the fact that some artists do not really wish to be photographed, technicalities going wrong all tax the photographer's skill both technically and psychologically in achieving the desired effect and obtaining a good picture. Added to this are the inevitable time restrictions the photographer always meet with at photo calls and the like. The equipment necessary is often highly specialised if the most professional results are to be achieved. Artists hate being kept waiting whilst lighting is adjusted, light meters read and cameras loaded,

and they will often be pleasantly surprised, if the correct equipment is used, at how relatively brief and painless a photographic session can be.



## HISTORY



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



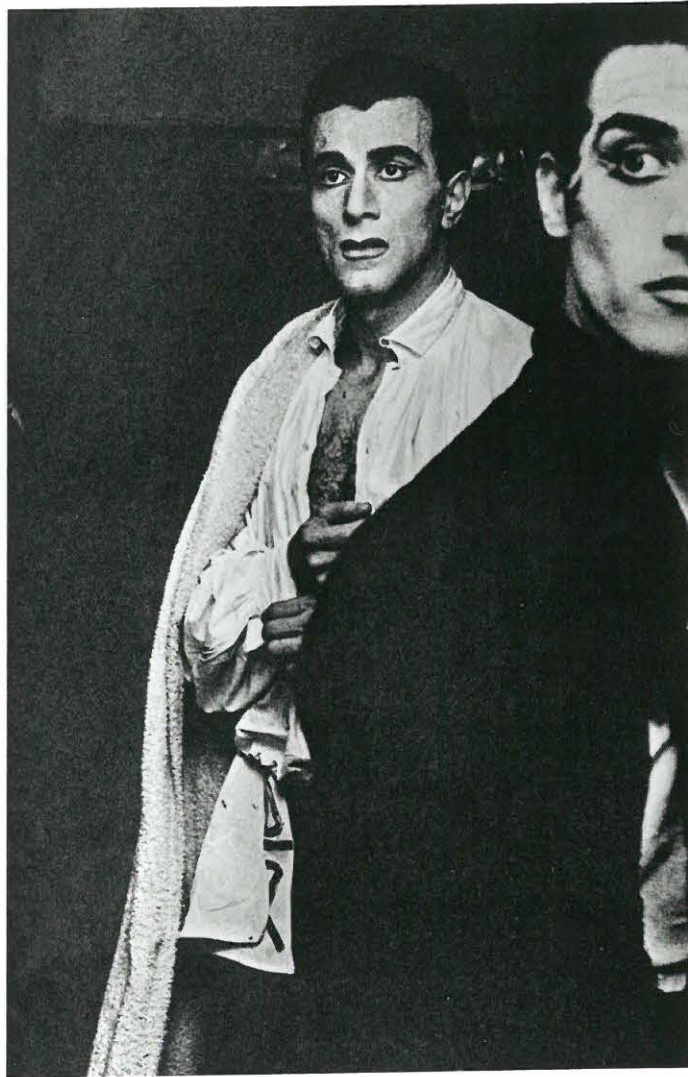


Plate 5

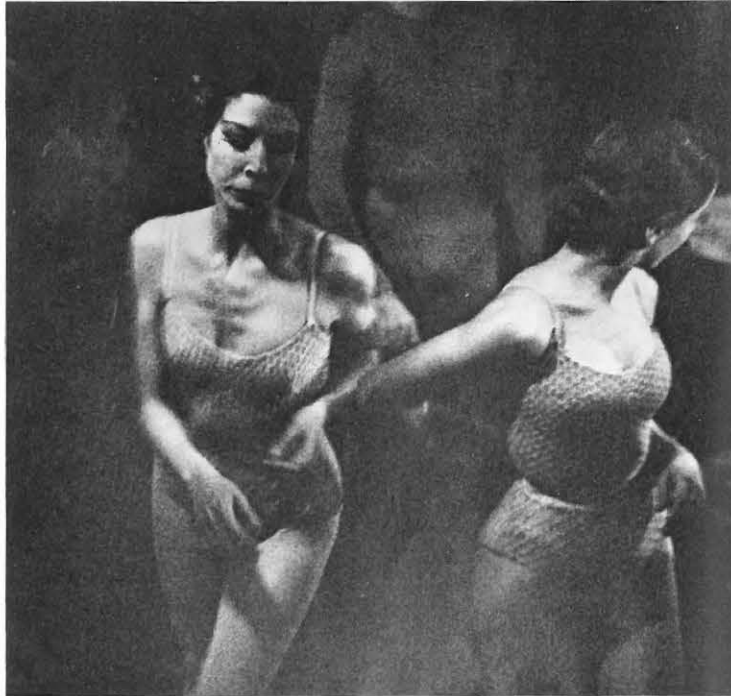


Plate 6

## HISTORY

Nadar (1820-1910) took photographs of Sarah Bernhart, a leading actress of the time. These photographs were posed in front of elaborate sets in Nadar's studio. Another photographer that took photographs of Sarah Bernhart was Napoleon Sarony, born in 1821, he became famous in New York. Although he was seen as one of the most colourful theatre photographers of the time, he did not get any artful recognition for his work. He could however make a living with his portrait studies that he did full of character with the help of his assistant Richardson. Photographers that did get recognition for their work of theatre personalities were Southwell of Cavendish Square and Grove of Baker Stree. Well known people such as Marie Tempest, William Tervis and others were shown in front of painted backdrops and idealistic theatre figures. (Naude, 1986, p 39).

During the civil war in America one of the most succesful theatre photographers was Charles de Forest Fredricks of New York. Most of the performers that played in Manhattan or Brooklyn visited Fredricks for cartes-de-visite at his studio at Broadway 581. The posed with or without costumes in front of unchanged backgrounds and furniture. Only after the 1890's did the first photos showing the inside



of theatres emerge. Watkins Herbert was the first to take a photo on-stage during a production, that of Charles Kean as Richard III. During the turn of the nineteenth century most of London's West End Productions were photographed by Foulsham and Banfield, which used the new magnesium process. (Naude, 1986, p 42).

The history of photography is just as much a technical evolution as it is an aesthetic or artistic one. The photography of true live performances grew during the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties at which stage technology advanced far enough to make possible the manufacture of fast enough lenses and film. One of the photographers that did do work at that stage was Brassai. He shot most of his photographs on a Rolleiflex. In 1933 he published a book "Paris de Nuit" (Paris by Night) in which he documented nightlife in Paris. The book points out the nocturnal population on the streets and points out the sights that are only visible after the sun has set. Although the book concentrates on street scenes there are shots of performers which Brassai photographed in nightclubs.

Another photographer that took photographs of performers in the early days was Garry Winogrand. He turned photographer in 1952, and became a reporter for the Pix agency. He took photographs backstage at New York's Broadway theatre during a performance called "Ballet de Paris" by Roland Petit.

The camera he used was a Leica 111F and he used both available light and an electronic flash gun for these shots. He also used both black and white negative and colour transparency film and used some of these shots as a picture story which was published in the annual of "Photograph" a photography magazine published in America. Plates four, five and six show two of these photographs. (Downes, 1955, p 238).

Up to the start of pop music the only live entertainment photographs that were being taken were of theatre productions generally for promotional purposes. With pop music the demand of the photographing of live shows increased as teenagers wanted to see their idols. This need gave rise to the music magazine. Today hundreds of these magazines are published around the world. These magazines usually have a number of resident photographers who are very competitive. Plate seven shows one of these magazines while plates eight and nine show some of the types of photo's they make use of.



PLATE 7







Plate 9

## THEATRE

## THEATRE

To photograph school plays or local amateur productions, it is best to first approach the Producer or Director. First, find out whether photographs are welcome. Amateur companies, not big enough to have an organized photo call, usually welcome some photographs as they might get some exposure from it, and a well-timed photograph in the local newspaper might make a big difference in their ticket sales. At both amateur and professional productions the photographer should always attend a rehearsal to find out which scenes offer the best photographic possibilities. This may be when there are a large number of people on stage, but two characters, or the principle character alone on stage, can make effective photographs as well. When shooting during a performance, this should be carried out as discreetly as possible - if possible, stay in one place and don't use a flash gun. This will give one a better chance of being invited to return.

Amateur productions provide one of the few opportunities in theatrical photography where the photographer would be allowed to take photographs during the performance as the professional theatre programme almost always carries a notice forbidding the taking of photographs in the auditorium during the performance. This is because of the disturbance it causes to both the actors and the audience.



However, most professional productions usually have professional photo calls. At these photo calls scenes from the production are recreated for the camera and these photographs are displayed in the foyer as well as distributed to the Press. These scenes are organized by the Director. At these photo calls the photographer cannot expect to be the only photographer as other photographers will also be invited.

When photographing dance or ballet capturing a sense of movement can also give pictures something more, especially if the grace and line of the piece are combined with that sense of motion. The photographer can take abstract shots which show blurred blocks of colour - some recognisable outline should be included in the picture. Photographs of ballet should comply to one very stringent rule - they must show the dancers with their limbs in the correct ballet positions. Facial expressions are an important part of each piece, and these too should be correct. The photographer should therefore show all of his shots to the public relations department of the Company involved before he shows them in public.

## LIGHTING

Lighting may prove to be a major difficulty. Theatre lighting has a great many limitations - not the least of



which is its low intensity. These light levels cause further problems when the subject is constantly moving. Many amateur events such as school plays and the local operatic society productions do not usually have the advantage of the same lighting facilities as the professional theatre. This makes the photographer's task even more difficult. The photographer will usually not be allowed to use a flash gun. Amateur productions which are professional enough to have a comprehensive lighting rig are not likely to welcome photographers during the show. Once permission has been obtained to shoot during rehearsals, it is both advisable and advantageous to attend a lighting run-through. This allows the photographer time to establish whether there are moments during the performance, such as the finale, when the light levels will be sufficient to use the available light. When the light levels are not sufficient, the photographer will have to supplement the existing light levels with a flash-gun if permissible. However, this should only be used as a last resort as a great deal of the feel of the photograph is lost in this way. The photographer may also organize special photo-calls where scenes from the production with full costume and props can be set up. At these photo calls, the photographer can then control the lighting considerably and supplement the existing light levels with a flash gun.

## FILM AND EXPOSURE

The choice of the film in theatrical work is very important. The photographer usually works in very low light situations with subjects who sometimes move quite rapidly - the climax of a play is an apt example of this type of situation. This situation calls for high speed film : 500 ASA black and white negative film allows the greatest exposure latitude. It can also be uprated - usually to 1600 ASA and 3200 ASA or if necessary as far as 6400 ASA and beyond. The resulting photographs are grainy and have a lot of contrast which can be very dramatic. In the case of colour film, 400 ASA or faster colour negative film which is balanced for daylight gives good results as colour casts from the tungsten balanced lights can be compensated for during printing. When using 400 ASA film, theatre lighting generally gives exposures of around 1/30th of a second at f5.6. However, light levels vary enormously from low lit scenes giving as little as 1/15th of a second at f4 to bright scenes at 1/60th of a second at f5.6. Big spotlights trained on the main characters will give one approximately 1/60th of a second at f5.6. When using colour transparency film in theatre photography, it is best to use a tungsten balanced film as it gives a better colour balance than daylight film; although large spotlights from the back of the auditorium tend to reproduce blue. Up-rating 400 ASA slide film to 1600 ASA (2 stops) tends to

shift the colour balance towards the warmer tones. Shadow areas will reproduce as browns rather than blacks because of this it is often possible to retain subtle details in the shadow areas which would normally be lost. The choice of film is also influenced by the reason for which the photographs are taken. Photographs for the Press are usually black and white negative film or colour transparency. Photographs for the foyer are usually shot on either black and white negative or colour negative. However, with larger budgets colour transparency would be used instead of colour negative.

In general the photographer should always use the fastest film available. The grain that accompanies it is usually not detrimental but can be used as an asset because it adds to the feel of the photograph. If the photographer wants to use blur in photographs the light levels will usually still be low enough for it to be easily obtained.

## BANDS

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As the case is with theatre photography, ninety percent of time the photography of bands is for promotional purposes. Thus the photographer must be able to communicate with the band and their promotion officer or manager. They always know what they want and the photographer must be able to provide it whether it is during a live performance or work to be done in the studio or on a formal location. The work will usually be for publication in a music magazine and competition at these magazines are quite stiff. Therefore the photographer must do his utmost to please the client or he will not be hired again. Another reason to please the client is that it will help establish the photographer's name and this is very important in the business of photographing bands.

## LIVE SHOWS

Capturing the excitement of a pop concert is one of the most demanding of photographic tasks and also one of the most rewarding. Extremely variable lighting, the excited crowds and the variety of venues are but a few of the difficulties the photographer can and probably will encounter. The photographer should choose the position from which he wishes to shoot very carefully; wherever possible trying to look down on the stage or at the very



least to be on the same level as the stage. The photographer should bear in mind that moving around at concerts could be quite difficult. In a large hall it is beneficial to have a seat in the balcony. This allows a clear view even when people are dancing. At small venues like pubs or clubs the photographer should be able to get close to the stage with a minimum of pushing and jostling. One is unlikely to remain in only one position so the photographer should try to carry only the barest minimum of equipment - a standard lens, and perhaps a wide angle lens. The photographer should always act confidently and look professional - people will almost always get out of the way if they think one is a professional, and that can make the business of producing good pictures a great deal easier. Always obtain permission before shooting a show. Bouncers seldom display great respect for property so, for one's camera's sake, one should avoid confrontations. Small bands are usually more than happy to have their pictures taken and will often buy some of the prints.

As the photographer will be working in the dark, it is absolutely essential to be completely familiar with the controls of the camera. The photographer should be able to set any aperture or shutter speed without taking his eye from the viewfinder. Even if the viewfinder displays the shutter speed and aperture selected, the photographer should bear in mind that it is unlikely that there will be

enough light to illuminate the figures - unless they are LED's. It is also very helpful to be able to use two or three camera bodies - each with a different lens and perhaps also a different type of film. This removes the necessity for constant changes of lens and film.

The variety of events that present themselves to be photographed is limitless. There could be fireworks, lasers, dancers or film shows - in fact anything that takes the performer's fancy. To be aware of what is coming up, the photographer needs to do some research in order not to be caught changing film at the wrong moment. The photographer should try to find out how the set will be structured ie where all the action will occur, so that he can be ready to record it. If the star performer being photographed has a trade mark - like Chuck Berry's duck-walk, or Pete Townsend's famous leap and gyrations, the photographer should try to shoot it. Unless a photographer is creative in his approach, pop stars can all look alike.

## LIGHTING

The lighting at live shows will be very similar to stage lighting, with the main differences being that the lights will usually be coloured and will not be as constant as stage lighting - the lights will usually be flashing and

alternating for most of the show. This makes this particular type of photography even more difficult. Light levels can change from very low to quite high in the blink of the eye. The photographer should learn how to anticipate these changes so as to avoid grossly over- or under- exposed shots. The lighting set ups used by small groups are unlikely to be very complex and a flash gun can be very helpful if permission to use it has first been obtained. However, the photographer should again only use a flash gun if there are no other available options as the mood of the performance will once again be lost. Unlike theatre work, the photographer will usually not be able to attend a lighting run-through as a rock show is usually not as well organized. Therefore the photographer has to be able to assess light levels quickly and accurately and always be prepared as anything could happen. The only certainty is that all the lights will again be tungsten.

A general problem at open air concerts and even at some concerts held in halls which are not perfectly suited for concerts of this sort, is that, most of the lights are placed behind the performers. The reason for this is that there is usually no place to attach the lights to and for any lights that are placed to the front, a stand or lighting tower has to be erected. These towers can create problems as the crowd can bump into them or use them as vantage points. The lack of lights from the front of the



performer has the effect that the performer and stage still looks well lit to the eye but on a photograph the performer is often reproduced too dark. To compensate for this problem the photographer should try to take the exposure reading from the performer's face or to over-expose by a stop or two.

## FILM AND EXPOSURE

The choice of film is once again very important as the lighting will be very variable and often very low. The photographer will be forced to uprate once again. Modern high speed emulsions are quite tolerant when pushed one or two stops; however it is possible to push as far as four stops with some colour slide films and even more with black and white negative film. There will be a certain amount of colour shift due to the extended development times necessary, but they will not be of any great importance since the lighting on stage is always coloured and never gives natural results. For the same reason tungsten film will not be a necessity as with the coloured lights there will seldom be any difference between tungsten-balanced and daylight-balanced film.

One of the most difficult things to master is the metering of the light levels to make sure that the film is correctly exposed for the subject. Most through - the - lens (TTL)

meters will be misled by the acres of darkness around the subject and will consequently indicate over-exposure of the subject. Readings should be taken from the members of the band and their instruments, and for this a spot meter is ideal. It will enable readings to be taken accurately at quite long distances. However, hand held spot meters are expensive and the photographer will usually not have the time to use it. An SLR with a built-in spot meter would be a better option although they are also very expensive. Another method is to use a lens which is long enough to fill the frame with the subject, take a meter reading and then change back to the lens one wishes to use. This is a useful technique but it is very cumbersome. Changing lenses in the dark in the middle of a jostling crowd is never very easy and one usually does not have the time for it. This technique is much easier when using a zoom. The most flexible technique - the photographer's equivalent of crossing fingers - is to meter normally and then decrease the exposure by approximately two stops. To make sure, it is best to check the exposure once or twice during the show. Automatic exposure systems need to be treated with care - if the photographer is not careful the camera may select a very slow shutter speed. This could result in camera shake or a grossly over-exposed shot. If in doubt switch to manual or use the camera's over-ride facility to adjust the exposure. Once mastered, automatic exposure systems can be very useful in situations with fast-changing

light levels.

## STUDIO WORK

Live entertainment photography does not only take place at live venues but also involves work done in the studio. This is a smaller yet equally important aspect of this type of photography. It is usually for promotional purposes or for articles in magazines. This type of work is not restricted to only black and white or only colour film and will change according to the purpose for which it is required. This will be specified by the client. It will also be specified which special effects are required, if any. Portrait shots, full length shots and group shots are included in studio work. Bands usually have an individual image which they wish to project to the public and the photographer will be expected to capture this image.

## LIGHTING

The lighting will involve the use of studio flash equipment and the photographer will be required to use lighting in a spectacular way. This can be anything from coloured gels to high contrast lighting and can also be accompanied by other special effects. Lighting can also range from portrait lighting to quite flat lighting to illuminate the whole group.

## FILM AND EXPOSURE

As studio work will usually be for publication the film used will usually be either black and white negative or colour transparency. Also, unlike live work the photographer will be able to use slower emulsions to cut down on grain and contrast. The speed of the emulsion will depend entirely on the strength of the studio flash system being used. Where one would usually use the fastest film available for live work exactly the opposite is true for studio work.

## EQUIPMENT



## EQUIPMENT

The photographer should always attempt to keep his equipment as plain and simple as possible as the cameras and lenses must suit the occasion. An SLR camera is the best choice for theatre or rock shows because it is easy to use and offers interchangeable lenses, TTL metering and complete mobility. It is possible to use a medium format camera for theatre and rock shows from time to time although it will seldom be necessary. However, it does decrease the graininess found when using fast films or with push processing. Medium format will usually be used in studio work where mobility is not a problem.

On an SLR a 50mm lens will suffice for most situations when able to work close to the stage. A wide angle is useful for shots of the entire stage from a close distance or in a small venue. A medium or long telephoto (135mm or 200mm) is useful for times when one cannot get close enough and will allow the photographer to take tightly cropped images of small areas of the stage. A wide angle lens and a 80-210mm zoom is the ideal combination of focal lengths to have, but with the zoom the slow shutter speeds required by maximum apertures of approximately f4 may prove to be more of a hindrance than a help. A tripod, the usual solution in low light photography, can limit the photographer's mobility and is therefore usually not practical in theatre

photography. It is better to practise bracing oneself against a seat or some other fixed object or to use a "rifle" grip.

A power winder or motor drive is a useful item but on some cameras it can add to the possibility of camera shake. It is also very noisy and in a theatre the photographer is usually trying to be as quiet as possible. Although at a rock show it is a very useful aid to getting a good picture from the fast movements happening on the stage.

If the photographer is using a flash gun, it is advisable to get a powerful model with a guide number of approximately 45 or 60. This is important as the photographer is usually trying to light quite a large area. The photographer should also decide between a model which uses batteries or a model which uses a battery pack. Batteries are cumbersome as the photographer always has to carry spare batteries and it is not desirable to have to change batteries halfway through a show. A battery pack is also not a perfect alternative as it can be quite cumbersome in crowded situations.

For studio work the photographer will also need a studio flash system. The size of this system will depend entirely on individual needs. A small portable system is the best to begin with as the photographer can then use it for location work as well.

## SPECIAL EFFECTS



## SPECIAL EFFECTS

Within the normal spectrum of theatrical photography, special effects are not widely used. As the aim of the photographer is to capture a true record of the performance, actors, lighting, sets and atmosphere, the addition of special photographic effects would seem superfluous. However, in any form of photography there is scope for a little creativity and it is this that can make the difference between a good and brilliant picture.

The use of filters is very limited as the photographer does not often have time to attach and remove filters from the lens. Of the many different types of filters on the market, most have little relevance within the theatre. Colour compensating filters are important if daylight balanced film has been used and needs correcting for tungsten lighting, or vice versa. Many of the correcting and compensating filters are useful only in daylight situations, where they will darken skies, cut down on flare, remove reflections and the like, and these will serve little purpose, obviously, in the artificial light conditions encountered at the theatre. However when productions take place outdoors, in daylight, such as open-air theatre and day long pop festivals, a skylight filter and a polarising filter could both be useful.

Skylight filters will cut through the ultra violet light that is invisible to the human eye; the effect is to cut out haze and to give better definition to the image. Polarising filters darken the sky, making clouds appear whiter - a dramatic sky can considerably improve a picture where a large area of sky is integral to the photograph. Polarising filters also cut out glare on shiny objects and glass which allows the photographer to cut out distracting highlights or to shoot through glass windows.

Special effect filters come in many forms, some designed to give effect with both colour and black and white materials, others being apparent only when working in black and white, and others apparent only in colour applications. Starburst filters are very suited to this type of photography and consist of a glass screen with criss-cross wire mesh within it; depending on the amount of mesh, this filter will give a six- or eight-pointed star where light has caught a reflective surface. Great care must be exercised in its use as it is extremely easy to overdo the effect, the best results being obtained when only one or two points pick up the light. Softar filters usually come in three different "strengths" and can be used one at a time or in conjunction with one another; their effect is to soften the image, which can be very useful when taking portraits as it will give the skin an almost glowing appearance and will considerably lessen any lines or wrinkles, thus giving a

more flattering portrait.

When working in monochrome, hand-tinting can give a pleasing effect, especially if its use is restricted to one region only. Hand-tinting, really a type of retouching, is done with specially made photographic dyes and fine paint brush. Blur is one of the other effects the photographer can use. This is usually used to show motion but can also be used quite artistically. Another effect the photographer can use is to shoot with an extra wide angle lens or a fish-eye lens to achieve a distorted image. This can be used very effectively to show large areas such as the whole stage.

## PERSONAL WORK



PLATE 10





PLATE 11



PLATE 12



PLATE 13



PLATE 14



PLATE 15





PLATE 16



PLATE 17



PLATE 18



PLATE 19





PLATE 20

THIS BOOK IS  
THE PROPERTY  
OF THE  
02 AUG 1999  
TECHNIKON  
FREE STATE

TECHNIKON  
OVS/OFS  
1993-06-23  
PRIVATISAK  
PRIVATISAK X20539  
BLOEMFONTEIN





PLATE 21



PLATE 22

## PERSONAL WORK

The author did work in both theatre photography and the photography of bands and used a wide range of films and techniques in doing so. He also encountered numerous difficulties. One of the first problems the author had to overcome was to be allowed to take photographs in the local theatres. The resident photographer was not at all keen to have another photographer stepping onto his turf, but eventually he could be convinced that his job was not in jeopardy and the author was allowed to take some photographs during dress rehearsals as photography during performances was not allowed for reasons stated earlier.

Another problem encountered was the unavailability of film fast enough to do the job. The author could eventually convince a local dealer in photographic material to stock 1000 ASA and 1600 ASA colour negative film which gave reasonable results when colour prints were required. The author also made extensive use of 400 ASA black and white film which he usually uprated to 1600 ASA or even 3200 ASA. The author's favourite film however was colour slide film, because it gave good results and could be uprated. The author generally used 100 ASA which he uprated as much as five stops to 3200 ASA. The author also made use of Kodak EPY 40 ASA tungsten film which had to be uprated to between 640 ASA and 1280 ASA. This gave very good results

for theatre work as it shows less colour casts which can be distracting in theatre work.

The author did all his work using two Pentax K1000 35 millimetre (mm) camera bodies. These proved to be extremely strong cameras as they took a large amount of very rough treatment and never gave any trouble. A variety of lenses were used including a 28mm, 50mm, 28-70mm, 80-200mm.

Plate 10 shows a photograph done with Kodak EPY 40 ASA tungsten film. As can be seen it shows very little colour casts, the bit of cast present is due to the fact that it was uprated to 1200 ASA.

Plate 11 shows a photograph done with Fuji RD 100 ASA daylight film which can be seen from the orange cast the tungsten lights of the theatre created, this is aggravated by the fact that it was uprated to 1600 ASA. This is not very detrimental and the result is still acceptable.

Plate 13 was done with Kodak EL 400 ASA daylight film uprated to 1600 ASA. This concert had spectacular lighting effects combined with smoke pumped from the back of the stage. It is to this that this photograph owes its striking power.

Plate 15 also done on Kodak EL 400 ASA uprated to 1600 ASA shows the artistic use of flare in this type of photography. Directly behind the artiste was a bank of lights that created the flare.

Plate 17 done on Ilfochrome 200 ASA uprated to 1600 ASA was taken from the side of the stage towards the crowd. This angle makes for some interesting shots because it shows the crowds reaction and facial expressions.



## CONCLUSION

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The field of live entertainment photography is a dynamic and exhilarating one. The photographer should stay in touch with the latest developments in the photographic industry as well as developments in the theatre and music business. All this together with life in the fast lane, which one experiences when doing rock concerts especially, can be very taxing but at the same time it is extremely rewarding. This is because the results achieved are usually extremely beautiful and the knowledge that from a total performance a few split seconds have been isolated to capture the emotion of the whole.

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